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ABSTRACT

Policies and procedures for student achievement within a provincial system are described and compared to a theoretical model of systemwide policy devolution. Student evaluation activity is examined at the following levels: province, district, school, department, and classroom. Methodology involves analysis of documents from four elementary and four secondary schools in two British Columbian districts, one urban and one rural, and interviews with representatives from each educational level. Similarities between current policies and the devolution model are provision of general policy direction and the generation of policies and procedures unique to each level. However, findings indicate a lack of policy statements based on an evaluation philosophy and an emphasis on reporting achievement results. A conclusion is that student and program evaluation is difficult in situations where standardized reporting formats of comparable achievement are entrenched and mandated. This situation creates a discrepancy between the goal of individual learning and the policies and procedures devised and enforced to report that learning. Three statistical tables are included. (2 references) (LMI)

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Characteristics of Policy and Procedures Governing Student Evaluation

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Characteristics of Policy and Procedures Governing Student Evaluation[1]

Evaluations in schools, districts and boards, provinces, and now even in countries are important aspects of educational life. The teacher reporting on progress to parents; the principal or counsellor investigating a need for alternative programming for a child with special needs; the district assessing its staff; and the province monitoring its programs are all activities that involve the educational organization in critical actions.

Two dimensions of this activity are immediately obvious. First, evaluation occurs in some form at all levels within the system. Secondly, the activity itself has many facets.

In the present study, evaluation activity is examined within and among the following levels within a single provincial educational system: the province, the district, the school, the department (where these exist within schools), and the classroom. While the activities themselves have also been categorized under such headings as student achievement, placement and selection, personnel assessment, guidance, diagnosis, and program evaluation, the present paper will examine only those policies and procedures dealing with student achievement.

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Purposes of the Study: The purposes of this specific report are threefold:

1. To describe the policies and procedures governing student achievement that exist within a provincial system;

2. To compare that description to a theoretical model of system-wide policy devolution; and

3. To assess the degree to which the content of the policies and procedures for student achievement fits a theoretical model of evaluation.

The model of both policy devolution and evaluation to be applied here was developed in Wilson and Rees (in press). The evaluation aspect of the model posits three interrelated parts to the activity: measurement, judgement, and decision-making. These activities are formally undertaken when it is decided that certain decisions warrant the accumulation of information in a systematic way that would allow rational evaluative judgements to occur. This system would work effectively when the measurements were conducted reliably, the judgements were valid, and the subsequent decisions, useful.

A frequent decision in schools, for example, involves promotion and placement. To that end, assessment of individual progress is conducted and reported regularly, with judgements made on the degree to which that progress is satisfactory. The practical

result of that judgement will be a decision to place the student in a particular program.

Such decisions are important aspects of the educational system's work, partly because they tend to bring it into contact with various external stakeholders. For such critical areas, policies and procedures tend to be developed, to serve as guides for those responsible for implementation. Several features characterize this activity. First, the policies and procedures tend to be written down, codified, so that there can be an objective documentary reference. Secondly, policy (statements of intention) will be accompanied by procedures (statements of process) to ensure implementation. These procedures may apply to the same level in the system or to subsidiary levels. These other levels may also develop policies, not only for their own purposes, but also as a result of direction given to them from levels above them in the hierarchy.

For example, a Ministry of Education may outline a policy with attendant procedures for placing students in special classes. Some of the procedures developed under that policy will be designed for Ministry use. Some will also likely be applied to districts or boards who may then take up these procedures and create a policy for their own personnel to follow in making placements. Procedures at this level may require schools, in turn, to develop their own practices for recommending candidates

for special treatment which, in turn, frequently require teachers using certain criteria to identify potential candidates.

An important feature of this particular model of policy devolution is that it posits interactions among the levels, with policy from one level creating the expectation that both policies and procedures at another level will be enacted. This systems-within-systems approach was deemed more likely to represent a provincial educational system than the more traditional, discrete levels approach.

Method

Sample: The province of British Columbia constituted the primary sampling unit. (Data were also collected in a parallel way in Ontario, but that analysis has not been completed yet.)

Two districts also volunteered to be participants in the study. One of these districts was large and urban and the other was smaller, with two urban centers in a largely rural area. From each of these units, two elementary and two secondary schools were invited to participate. From each elementary school, two classrooms constituted the final level. From each secondary school, four departments (where these existed) and a classroom from each of these four departments constituted the final embedded levels.

The obtained sample differed from the planned sample in that two secondary classes produced inadequate data for inclusion while three additional elementary classes and one additional elementary school volunteered and were included.

Instrumentation: Documents were collected at each of the sites of the levels described above. These documents were analyzed for evidence of policies and procedures that related to any of the purposes of evaluation outlined above. In addition, representatives of each level (the classroom teachers, department heads, principals, district or board supervisors, and Ministry officials) were interviewed with an instrument that asked for specific information concerning evaluation policy and practice. The interview was designed to locate policies and procedures that were in use but which may not have been formalized or documented. All written material was analyzed and all interviews were conducted during the 1987/88 school year.

A total of 1 256 statements was collated and coded, of which 825 (66%) referred to student achievement. These statements were collected from the province, two districts, eight schools, eight departments, and 25 classrooms.

Data Analysis: Each statement on student achievement, defined as any oral or written subject-verb combination referring to aspects

of evaluating student performance, was coded according to the following:

1. Source of Policy or Procedure: province, district, school, department, classroom
2. Type of School (if relevant): elementary, junior secondary, secondary
3. Recipient of Policy or Procedure: province, district, school, department, classroom
4. Statement Type: policy or procedure

Summary descriptive statistics were produced for each of these dimensions. In addition, qualitative analysis of the content of related statements was conducted to determine the degree to which the joint models of evaluation and policy devolution adequately described the obtained data.

Results

To determine how well the model of policy devolution described the student achievement statements, these data were analyzed jointly by source and recipient. The source of the policy was that level within the educational system that had originated the statement. The recipient of the policy was that level expected to implement the policy. Table 1 indicates the devolution arrangements for these particular policies. The data are defined largely as the model would predict: policies either apply to the source itself or to a level below the source in the hierarchy.

The model also predicts that subordinate levels would likely have more policies referring to themselves than would those levels above them in the hierarchy, with this ratio increasing as the level of subordination increases. The data in Table 1 affirm this expectation for all but two levels: the district and the department. Neither the district nor the department have their own policies governing student achievement although both have at least one procedure in this area. The department level is not a recipient of devolved policies either, except from its immediately superior level. In viewing the actual statements concerning student achievement, it appears that the school and the department serve as an integrated level for policy and procedural matters concerning student achievement.

All levels in the system, except for the classroom, do originate more policies for student achievement than they receive. Of the 109 policies the classroom receives (81% of the total), only 23 originated within it. The classroom-as-object thrust is also evident in the procedural source by recipient display. (See Table 2.) Eighty-six per cent of the procedures apply to classroom practice, with only 30% of the total originating at that level.

Qualitative Analysis: What is unclear from this accounting of policies and procedures is the degree to which they are actually related to each other in content. The pattern of consistency

noted above could be accounted for, in part, by each level developing practices for its perceived purposes which may or may not relate to those of other levels in the hierarchy.

If the model were to hold in content as well as in frequency, then it would be expected that policy content would also devolve in a manner similar to that of the frequency. Table 3 indicates the headings of student achievement policies that were derived from the content of the statements and the levels at which these topics were found in at least one policy statement.

The Ministry Level: At the Ministry level, the policies and procedures directed themselves at the following aspects of student achievement (listed in order of frequency): reporting of achievement (more than one-half the statements), provincial examinations, scholarships, consultation, appeals, and promotion.

Two different types of policy statements were evident in the Ministry's approach. The first type gave general goals to the process, the classic role of policy. For example, one policy statement in the dominant area of reporting said: "It is essential that parents be kept informed of progress achieved toward expectations held in common by the teacher, student, parents, and community." Presumably, other statements of policy and procedure on reporting could be referred to this overall statement for consistency.

The second type of policy statement was more instrumental in character. These statements typically gave direction for procedural development without explicitly providing a goal for either the policy or the procedures. An example of this type would be the following Ministry policy: "The professional staff is responsible for communicating student progress to parents and students at three periodic intervals throughout the school year."

It is this instrumental type of statement that tends to provide the impetus for policy and procedures developed at subsequent levels. Several of these statements refer specifically to the school's responsibilities, the professional staff's responsibilities, and the district's responsibilities. The content of these devolutionary statements refers most often to standardization of procedures concerning reporting and report card symbols ("The communication [of student progress] must be in a form prescribed by the Ministry or approved by the board"); administration of provincial examinations ("Through its Student Assessment Branch, the Ministry participates in the provincial evaluation of student progress by administering Grade 12 Provincial and Scholarship Examinations"); and appeals of marks by students ("Each district is expected to establish an adjudication committee to consider appeals of individual students against school marks.")

The District Level: As was noted in the quantitative analysis, these districts at least were not key players in the student achievement aspect of evaluation policies and procedures. One district had a number of procedures designed to help teachers perform student assessment; the other district had a few policies on grading and interim reporting. In addition it had a statement adopting the Ministry policies on reporting as its own. On balance, however, these districts seemed to pass on responsibilities in this area to the schools.

The Secondary School Level: Most of the statements concerning student achievement were found at the school level, and most of these, at the secondary level. With some notable exceptions, these schools' policies were of the instrumental type: directing teachers (mainly) to perform certain activities.

The main thrusts of the schools' policies were in the areas of grading, absences from evaluation activities, reporting, examinations, communication of procedures to students, and weighting of various types of activities. The focus on reporting and examinations reflected provincial level emphases as well, but the attention to attendance, communication, and weightings were unique to the schools themselves.

One of the secondary schools had developed an unusually large number of policy statements, many of which attempted to provide a

philosophy of evaluation to departments and teachers. For example, this school had statements dealing with definitions of evaluation ("Evaluation is a process that allows teachers and students to make judgements about their success in reaching educational objectives"); with the need for reliability and validity ("The evaluation program reflects a variety of types and forms of evaluation" and "Letter grades should not be used to report student attitude, conduct or other aspects of a student's personality. This evaluation is to be outside the context of academic achievement"); and with consistency of the evaluation policies with other aspects of school functioning ("Each department's evaluation program must be consistent with the school's instructional and promotional policies, as well as with its philosophy and objectives.")

The devolutionary aspect of this school's approach was also found in its instrumental policies dealing with review. One of the policies specifically referred to the "review/discussion of the evaluation program, process and procedures" to be undertaken at the school and department level on a "regular" basis. Reiteration of Ministry policies concerning the expectations of students, parents and community were included, indicating a responsiveness to provincial policies. In addition, procedures to be followed in the development of departmental practices were delineated. In virtually all these respects, this school was unique in the survey.

Most of the statements from all the secondary schools dealt with procedural matters, and most of the instrumental policies and procedures referred to grading and reporting, examinations, attendance, and communication. For grading, the procedure might say the following: "Where percentage scores are used to reflect student achievement, consistency will be ensured by all subject areas employing a particular scale." For reporting, "Report cards are issued in the late Fall, early Spring and June. In addition to the regular reports, subject teachers are encouraged to send out interim reports on borderline students throughout the year." For attendance at examinations, "If the student was truant at the time of the exam, s/he shall be given a zero for that exam." For communication, "Students [will] be informed at the beginning of year, in writing, how they will be evaluated."

The need for school-wide standardization of evaluation activity dominates these statements. Where exceptions occur, these are typically handled at the department level.

<u>The Department Level:</u> The departments' policies and practices refer most often to weightings of examinations, some of which may be common across all the classes within a particular course. For example, the Science department in one school had a ratio of 60% assignments to 40% examinations throughout the department for grading purposes. It is in the structure of the ways in which

grades are developed that most departments differ among themselves. Thus, the department's policies are reflections of the school's policies in those areas where the school cannot write a single statement that would cover all the differences in school subjects.

The Elementary School Level: Policies and procedures at this level mirrored, to some extent, the concerns of the secondary school. An emphasis on grading and reporting characterized the various schools' statements as it did in the secondary school. There was little emphasis on absences, however, but there was some attention paid to group administered standardized test results which featured little in the secondary schools' activities.

Distinctions were made at the elementary school level that reflected the absence of a departmental structure. Policies and practices concerning reporting usually differed depending on the division. Primary grades (Kindergarten through Grade 3) tended to use an anecdotal reporting system while some form of letter grades by subject characterized the intermediate grades (Grades 4 through 7). Parent-teacher conferences also appeared prominantly in the reporting procedures at the elementary school.

The Secondary Teacher Level: There was a high degree of uniformity in the policies and procedures provided by secondary

teachers, not only in their content but also in the areas covered. Without exception, these teachers informed their students, usually in writing at the beginning of the semester or year, how the evaluation would proceed. This information might contain the timing, frequency, and weighting of the various assessments along with their types.

Procedurally, there was also a high degree of uniformity in the manner in which the assessments occurred. There was often a regularity in the evaluations (end of unit tests, assignments, and examinations at specified times) culminating in a percentage that was translated into a letter grade equivalent. All students in the class were evaluated with the same instruments although some exceptions were provided under special circumstances. A more complete description of these teachers' policies and procedures is provided in Wilson (1990).

The Elementary Teacher Level: There was a sharp division in practice in this group of teachers approaches to student evaluation. The primary level teachers tended to use less well defined evaluative situations to generate judgements about student achievement. Checklists, projects, anecdotal records, observations of ongoing student work combined to produce a verbal summary of an individual's performance. Little or no attempt was made in these classrooms to compare the achievement of students to each other.

At the intermediate level, however, a shift to evaluation activities in standard form occurred in all the schools. The evaluation became subject based, uniform, and more objective than that practised in the primary level. This orientation is reflected in the reporting procedures which also become based on subject letter grades rather than individualized verbal reports. See Wilson (1990) for a more complete description of these teachers' approaches as well.

Discussion

The model of policy devolution does seem to describe the broad outlines of evaluation policy existing in this sample of educational jurisdictions. General policy directions are provided at the provincial level in such areas as reporting, examinations, and scholarships and, where these tnrusts included specific policy direction, these seem to be reflected in district, school and department, and classroom practice.

In addition, each level also generated policies and/or procedures that were devised for its own functioning, a feature that is also predicted by the model. For example, the secondary school level had procedures (if not always policies) governing attendance at tests and examinations, and the elementary school had statements referring to standardized test use. Neither of these areas is mentioned in provincial policy statements.

It is in the quality of those policies and procedures, however, that a different picture emerges. No level in the system has developed policy statements to any degree that reflect an evaluation philosophy, regardless of whether that philosophy on evaluation would be consistent with a philosophy of education generally. Most of the policy statements that do exist are instrumental rather than intentional; they describe what and who should do something but not why they should do it. As a consequence, the policies and procedures that do emerge evolve into a context rather than determine one.

The dominant part of that context at all levels in the system is the reporting of achievement. The procedures typically set up time blocks throughout the year in which reporting must occur, dictate the form of that reporting, define the grading system that will be used, and standardize the procedures under which the data are amassed and recorded. From the policy perspective, reporting achievement results is the main decision-making activity of the school in the area of student evaluation.

As was shown in Wilson (1990), such an overwhelming emphasis on reporting creates classroom evaluation activity that coincides with the rhythm of the reporting cycle. Teachers use unit tests, exercises, and at the secondary level, formal examinations to accumulate data in a standardized way. The use of letter grades,

described (but not defined) in percentage equivalents, contribute to the judgement that any student's work is to be related to that of other students. The objectives are identical for all mainstream students--all do the same assignments and tests--and grades are reported on a common scale.

The measurement requirements in such a system are those that will generate variability. Thus, while teachers advocate the generation of measures that have content validity, that emphasis is altered by a tendency to ensure that enough spread is created to meet the grading system's requirements for differentiation.

There are a number of exceptions to this general situation. The primary grades constitute a major exception as did one "department" at the secondary level called Learning Assistance. This department, which dealt with individuals recommended by their regular teachers as needing special help, operated a pretest/posttest, mastery model of evaluation. The pretests were diagnostic in nature, individualized programs were devised, and posttests designed that reflected individual growth. The reporting of this Learning Assistance department was primarily to the student and to the regular classroom teachers of the student.

The primary teachers tended to operate under a less rigid set of policy and procedural conditions than did their colleagues in other divisions. Their reporting, for example, tended to be

anecdotal, buttressed by frequent conferences with parents. The judgements made about students reflected the same attention to individual growth that the Learning Assistance teacher used. The measurement concentrated on "observation" as well as ongoing exercises of various types.

While this approach may be found inadequate in terms of reliability --the same observer typically is performing all the observations, under less than optimal conditions for ensuring accuracy--it seems likely that the operations used by these teachers are more consistent with the Ministry's policy statement concerning the need to evaluate "the progress of individual students with regard to the curriculum" than is the standardized and ultimately normative basis used by their colleagues in other divisions.

In the policies and procedures actually developed for reporting to parents in these other divisions, this policy statement (as well as other, related ones) is imperfectly implemented. While the teachers begin with the objectives of the course for assessment purposes, they must create a normative result to fit the grading policy. Thus the "progress" being described is related less to the curriculum and more to other students' achievement. The grading policy in widest use typically transfers percentage equivalents into letter grades without defining either one. Whether this lack of defined achievement

meets "expectations held in common" by significant groups and individuals affected is, of course, impossible to determine from such a tautology.

What is possible to determine from these policies and procedures at the intermediate and secondary levels is that evaluation of individual growth in learning or development of individual programs of learning are made virtually impossible where standardized reporting formats of comparative achievement are mandated and entrenched. The net result at these levels is a fundamental contradiction between the goals of creating growth in learning for individuals according to their needs and the policies and procedures devised and enforced for reporting that learning.

References

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Table 1

Evaluation Policies, By Source and Recipient, for Student Achievement

Source	Recipient						
	Ministry	Dist	School	Dept	Classroom	Other	Total
Ministry	3	4	8	0	5	0	20
District		0	1	0	4	0	5
School			7	3	61	0	71
Department				0	16	0	16
Classroom					23	0	23
Totals	3	4	16	3	109	0	135

Table 2

Evaluation Procedures, By Source and Recipient, for Student Achievement

Source	Recipient						
	Ministry	Dist	School	Dept	Classroom	Other	Total
Ministry	6	9	36	0	53	1	105
District		3	7	0	21	0	31
School			23	4	230	3	260
Department				1	82	3	86
Classroom					205	3	208
Totals	6	12	66	5	591	10	690

Table 3

CONTENT OF POLICIES AND PROCEDURES IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT BY LEVEL OF ORIGIN

Content	Level				
	Ministry	District	School	Dept	Classroom
Scholarships	X				
Consultation re Evaluation	X				
Appeals	X				
Reporting, Grading	X	X	X	X	X
Individual Assessment	X	X	X	X	X
Examinations	X	X	X	X	X
Promotion	X		X		
Attendance			X	X	X
Communication to Students			X	X	X
Weightings of Evaluation Types			X	X	X
Timing and Types of Evaluation				X	X

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